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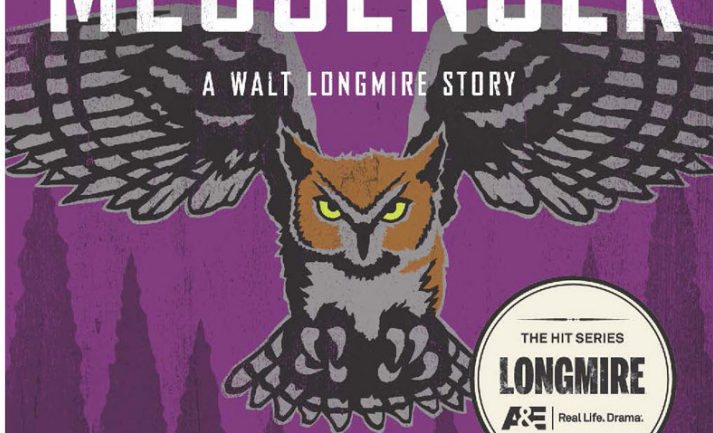
VIKING

CRAIG JOHNSON

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of *THE COLD DISH* and *AS THE CROW FLIES*

MESSANGER

A WALT LONGMIRE STORY



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First Chapter of *A Serpent's Tooth* (Book 9 in the Walt Longmire Mystery Series)

CRAIG JOHNSON

MESSENGER

A WALT LONGMIRE STORY

VIKING

Craig Johnson is the author of eight novels in the Walt Longmire mystery series, which has garnered popular and critical acclaim. *The Cold Dish* was a Dilys Award finalist and the French edition won Le Prix du Polar Nouvel Observateur/BibliObs. *Death Without Company*, the Wyoming Historical Association's Book of the Year, won France's Le Prix 813, and *Kindness Goes Unpunished*, the third in the series, has also been published in France. *Another Man's Moccasins* was the Western Writers of America's Spur Award winner and the Mountains and Plains Book of the Year, and *The Dark Horse*, the fifth in the series, was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year. *Junkyard Dogs* won the Watson Award for a mystery novel with the best sidekick and *Hell Is Empty* was a *New York Times* bestseller. The eighth novel in the series, *As the Crow Flies*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and an Indie Next Pick. All are available from Penguin. Craig Johnson's Walt Longmire novels have now been adapted for television in the hit series *Longmire* on A&E. His next novel, *A Serpent's Tooth*, will be available from Viking in June 2013. Johnson lives in Ucross, Wyoming, population twenty-five.

Praise for Craig Johnson and the Walt Longmire Mystery Series

“Like the greatest crime novelists, Johnson is a student of human nature. Walt Longmire is strong but fallible, a man whose devil-may-care stoicism masks a heightened sensitivity to the horrors he’s witnessed. Unlike traditional genre novelists who obsess mainly over every hairpin plot turn, Johnson’s books are also preoccupied with the mystery of his characters’ psyches.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Johnson knows the territory, both fictive and geographical, and tells us about it in prose that crackles.”

—Robert B. Parker

“The characters talk straight from the hip and the Wyoming landscape is its own kind of eloquence.”

—*The New York Times*

“[Walt Longmire] is an easy man to like. . . . Johnson evokes the rugged landscape with reverential prose, lending a heady atmosphere to his story.”

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“Stepping into Walt’s world is like slipping on a favorite pair of slippers, and it’s where those slippers lead that provides a thrill. Johnson pens a series that should become a ‘must’ read, so curl up, get comfortable, and enjoy the ride.”

—*The Denver Post*

“A winning piece of work . . . There’s a convincing feel to the whole package: a sense that you’re viewing this territory through the eyes of someone who knows it as adoring lover and skeptical onlooker at the same time.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Johnson’s pacing is tight and his dialogue snaps.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Truly great. Reading Craig Johnson is a treat. . . . [He] tells great stories, casts wonderful characters and writes in a style that compels the reader forward.”

—*Wyoming Tribune Eagle*

VIKING

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For Lola, our Shoshone Rose

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Messenger is another one of those stories that I like to refer to as a *connecting tissue* between my Walt Longmire novels—little stories that aren’t so much of a *mystery* but are more revealing of *character*. There are things I count on in the books and in the stories, characters that I depend on to bring a certain energy to the scenes and two of the big ones are Henry and Vic; I always know that when they join Walt, things seem to happen—sometimes crazy things.

A portion of the proceeds of this story goes to the Teton Raptor Center in Jackson, Wyoming, in hopes that they will extend their efforts in saving owls in the Bighorn Mountains. If you’d like to make a further donation, they can be reached below.

Teton Raptor Center

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E-mail: raptors@tetonraptorcenter.org

I’d like to thank the Teton Raptor Center for the information I gleaned from them along with Marcus Red Thunder for the Cheyenne owl lore. And where would I be on the hanging road if not for Gail “Goshawk” Hochman, Marianne “Merlin” Merola, Kathryn “Great Horned Owl” Court, Tara “Snowy Owl” Singh, Barbara “Gyr Falcon” Campo, Scott “European Eagle Owl” Cohen, Carolyn “Crested Owl” Coleburn, Maureen “Crowned Eagle” Donnelly, Ben “Bald Eagle” Petrone, and Angie “Screech Owl” Messina—and as always, my little Burrowing Owl, Judy.

The crow wished everything was black, the owl, that everything was white.

—William Blake

Messenger

It was one of those late summer days that sometimes showed up in early October after a killing frost—warm, dry, and hazy; Indian summer. The term is over two hundred years old and was first coined by the French American writer John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in 1778, describing the warm calm before the winter storm.

Boy howdy.

If one of these miraculous days happened to appear on an autumn Saturday in north central Wyoming, Henry Standing Bear and I would head up into the Bighorn Mountains, a sister range to the Rockies, conveniently located between the Black Hills of South Dakota and Yellowstone National Park. No place in the area offers a more diverse landscape, from lush grasslands to alpine meadows, from crystal-clear lakes to rushing streams, and from rolling hills to sheer mountain walls—or so read the national forest travel brochure and map I had unfolded in my lap.

The Bear had been my best friend since grade school, and we always headed for those crystal-clear lakes or rushing streams in pursuit of rainbow, brown, brook, and cutthroat trout. We were returning from one of those trips on a late afternoon with a cooler of fish, the aspens having turned a shimmering gold, which provided a counterpoint to the dense verdant green of the conifers. The made-for-my-life VistaVision effect was ruined by only one thing; due to the road conditions leading in and out from one of our favorite spots along Baby Wagon Creek, relatively unknown to the greater fishing population, I was forced to accompany Henry in his truck, Rezdawg, a vehicle I hated beyond all others.

Making the environs more decorative, however, was Victoria Moretti, my undersheriff, who had decided to join us. We'd just rounded a corner when Rezdawg's wrinkled right fender collided with one of the aspens, which scraped along the door and knocked into my elbow. It might've collided with the passenger-side mirror if there had been one, but we'd knocked that off a mile back.

The trunk was a little bit bigger in circumference than a Major League Baseball bat. "Ouch."

Vic was seated between us, and I glanced at her; dressed in provocative jeans, hiking boots, and a hooded Philadelphia Flyers sweatshirt, the buds of her iPod were in her ears, her eyes were closed, and she was ignoring everything, including me.

Diving between two more trees before heaving the vintage 4x4 over a rock outcropping on top of a small ridge and sliding down the other side, the Bear sawed at the wheel and looked at me, rubbing my elbow. "Are you okay?"

I folded the boredom-fighting map and stuffed it into the glove compartment with a box of fuses, an old radiator cap, a seventeen-year-old vehicle registration, and a large mouse nest. "Scarred for life." I glanced back at him, unsure of what to make of the attention and instead focused on Vic's head, bobbing along with the music playing so loudly we could hear it by just sitting next to her. "I don't think she's concerned for my welfare."

"Do you think she is upset about not catching any fish?"

"If she was, she should've tied a fly on the end of her line and put it in the water; that's where I usually catch fish." I reset the handheld radio that kept trying to ride up under my rump and placed it back between Vic and me. "Are you sure this is the way we came in?"

He gestured toward the surrounding forest. "The trees are bigger than last year."

I braced a hand against the dash. "Uh-huh."

He shot a response at my disbelief, the corners of his mouth pulled down like guidelines on an outfitter's wall tent. "Shortcut."

"Uh-huh."

The handheld radio chattered briefly, but it had been doing that all day; set on scan, it was picking up the signals from the sheriff's department, the highway patrol, the forest service, and the wardens from game and fish. I picked the thing up and toyed with the squelch in an attempt to get better reception, but it didn't seem to do any good. "Wardens must be busy . . ."

The Cheyenne Nation nodded and looked at me again. "Hunting season and the last of the tourists."

I pointed toward the road, or the lack thereof. "If you'd pay more attention to where we're going, you might save some of these trees." He ignored me, and I continued to fiddle with the knobs on the police radio, the only concession I made to my full-time job when fishing—in my line of work it's sometimes important for people to get in touch with me; not too often, but sometimes.

I could feel his eyes on me as he looked past Vic, grooving in her own world. "What?"

He did his best to sound innocent, something at which he wasn't particularly good. "What?"

"Why are you behaving strangely?"

He turned back to the road. "Define strangely."

"You keep watching me and asking me if I'm all right."

He didn't turn to look at me this time. "Are you?"

"Yep." I sighed. "You didn't answer my question."

"As a good friend . . ." He sounded annoyed now. "Can I not simply be interested in your general well-being?"

"No, not really." I picked up and played with the radio again and thought about what this kind of inordinate attention usually meant. "Have you been talking to Cady?" My daughter, The Greatest Legal Mind of Our Time, was a lawyer in Philadelphia. Newly married to Michael, my undersheriff Vic's brother, she was pregnant with her first child but sometimes treated me as if I were one. "What've the two of you been cahooting about now?"

He shook his head. "I know you are in the suspicion business, but your paranoia may be getting the best of you."

"Are you saying you haven't been talking with her?"

"No."

"No what?"

He shook his head solemnly. "No, I did not say that."

"No, you haven't been talking to Cady or no you didn't say that?"

"Exactly."

I shook my head and watched the passing scenery as we bumped along.

After a few moments, he spoke again, just as I knew he would. "I am supposed to broach a subject with you."

"Ahh . . ." This is the way it usually worked; Cady, unwilling to ask me questions on more sensitive issues, would sometimes ask the Bear to intercede and bring the subject up, floating a topic for response before the real familial debate began. "What's this about?"

"Your granddaughter."

I took a breath, realizing the subject matter was of true import. "Okay."

"She is going to need a name."

I nodded. "Tell my daughter I agree, the child should have a name."

He quickly added, ignoring the humor. "It is a question of *what* name."

I smiled; Henry had been friends with both my deceased wife and me long before we'd gotten married. "We discussed that when she was here for rodeo—she's going to name her Martha."

There was a long pause as the Cheyenne Nation fought the wheel, the road, and possibly me.

I turned and looked at him. "She's not going to name her daughter

after her mother?" He shrugged. "We talked about this; we sat there in the bleachers at rodeo and she brought up her mother's name and I seconded it."

"She says you are the one who brought up Martha's name."

"I wasn't."

"She said she mentioned something about the baby's name and that you brought up Martha."

"I just brought her mother's name up casually in conversation, and then she said she was going to name the baby after her."

He shook his head some more. "When you bring Martha's name up in conversation, it is never casual."

We drove in silence, hearing only the music in Vic's ears.

"I might've brought it up uncasually." He continued to say nothing, which spoke volumes. "So, she doesn't want to name the baby after her mother?"

"She is not sure."

"Fine."

"Obviously, it is not."

"I just . . ." My voice sounded a little confrontational even to me, so I changed my tone. "It's just that I'd gotten used to the idea."

"Your idea."

"Evidently." We glanced off another tree, but they were fewer and farther between. "What does she want to name the baby?"

"Lola."

We drove along in silence as I contemplated the thought that my daughter was considering naming my granddaughter after a 1959 Baltic Blue Thunderbird convertible. "She wants to name my granddaughter after your car?"

He gestured toward the vehicle in which we rode. "At least she is not going to name her Rezdawg."

"Lola, really?"

"Yes."

I thought about it. "Where did the name of your car come from?"

"There was a lovely young woman from South Dakota . . ."

"The stripper?"

He smiled a knowing smile. "She was a dancer, yes."

"A stripper; she was a stripper from over in Sturgis you dated in the seventies."

"She was a very talented performer."

"And you named the car after her."

"Yes."

"I'm not having my granddaughter named after a car named after a stripper." I shook my head. "Lola Moretti. Lola Moretti?"

Vic chimed in for the first time, and I noticed she'd taken the buds

from her ears and was cupping them in her hand. "Sounds like a pole dancer to me."

Static. "... A couple of lives endangered, and if we don't get any help here pretty soon I'm going to have to do something drastic."

Henry, Vic, and I looked at the handheld radio in my grip as if the device itself might have blurted out the words and interrupted our conversation.

I punched the button on the mic and responded. "This is Walt Longmire, sheriff of Absaroka County. Copy?"

Static. "... Crazy Woman Canyon, and the situation is pretty serious. We can't get to our vehicles and ..." The sound drifted off, and I glanced at Henry. "... Without backup I'm going to have to use my gun."

I keyed the mic again; it sounded like Chuck Coon, one of the forest service rangers. "Chuck, this is Walt Longmire. Over?"

The Bear mumbled under his breath. "Did you say Chuck Coon?"

I nodded and smiled. Coon was actually a very nice guy—the kind of ranger who wouldn't cite you if your campfire was an inch too close to the trail or your horse was picketed a little too near a water source. Henry, however, had had a few visits with him about the difference between brook trout and brown trout and the number of each species allowed a day, but ever since I had dissuaded a group of motorcyclists traveling from Sturgis from beating Coon to death at West Tensleep Campground, the ranger had pretty much decided we were best friends. "Sounds like he's in trouble."

Henry shrugged. "We could go help whoever is trying to kill him."

I thought about the distance between where we were now and where the ranger was. "How long do you think it'll take us to get there?"

The Cheyenne Nation thought about it. "Not too long."

Looking out the window to avoid Henry's intermittent gaze as we glanced off another tree, I folded my arms on my chest. "Lola."

Henry remained resolute. "It is a lovely name."

Vic shrugged. "She's my niece, and I vote for Lola. We just better start stocking up on body glitter."

. . .

Passing Muddy Creek forest station, Henry accelerated into the turn and slowed at the dirt road marked Crazy Woman Canyon, a spot in the Bighorn Mountains where a settler family had been decimated, leaving only the mother who had, reasonably, lost her mind; the incident made famous in the Robert Redford film *Jeremiah Johnson*. "Did Coon say Crazy Woman Canyon or the campground at Crazy Woman Creek?"

"There is no campground in the canyon, but there is one at the north fork of the creek." I braced a hand on the dash and again reached around

for a seatbelt, even though I knew there were none.

Vic added. "He must've been confused."

Henry hit the gas, the engine wheezed, and we lugged our way up the hill, lashing back onto route 16, flailing the extra quarter of a mile down the pavement.

My undersheriff looked to our left, pointing past Henry up the small valley. "There—I can see a forest service vehicle with the light bar on."

The Bear spun the wheel, and we flat-tracked our way northwest, sliding to a stop beside a silver Mustang with California plates and a Federal Standard 595 mint-green truck with the driver's side door hanging open; there was a Porta Potty nearby on top of which were two people who I gathered were trying to get away from a large sow black bear and two adolescents milling around the base of the convenience.

As the Cheyenne Nation slid to a stop from a distance of about sixty feet, he rolled the window down, and Vic called out to the ranger. "Hey Chuck, looks like there's a line for the john."

I climbed out the passenger-side window, sat safely on the sill, and looked over the top of Rezdawg's headache rack as the younger bears, munching on what appeared to be a large amount of popcorn scattered across the ground, glanced at us for a moment before resuming their snuffling around the one-seater. The sow, all six hundred pounds of her, left the snack food and the area around the Porta Potty and ambled two steps our way, grumbling a little and then bouncing up on her hind legs to sniff the air in our direction.

Henry didn't move, his own elbow still hanging from the driver's side window. "Looks like she is on-the-fight."

Vic glanced through the windshield at the two on the roof and then back to the three bears, raising her voice to be heard. "Hey Chuck, what were you doing, looking for a Porta Potty that was just right?"

Maintaining his position, but allowing his legs to drop over the side, he adjusted his campaign hat and glanced at a young woman behind him. "This is Ms. Andrea Napier from Pasadena, and she thought it might be fun to feed the bears a bag of caramel corn."

I waved at the young woman. "Hi, Andrea."

She waved back but without much enthusiasm. "Hi."

I ducked my head down and looked at the Cheyenne Nation. "How attached are you to those fish we caught?"

He sighed, relinquishing the idea that trout was going to be the special at the Red Pony Bar & Grill tonight.

Vic and I watched as the Bear nonchalantly opened the door of the truck, slid his boots onto the gravel of the parking lot, and faced the bear. The sow leaned a little forward and huffed at him again but didn't take any further aggressive action. Henry slowly raised a hand and spoke in a calming voice. "Hello, little sister; you should not let your young ones eat

such things . . .” He reached into Rezdawg’s bed and flipped open the old, metal Coleman cooler, covered with stickers, and pulled out the plastic tray containing all the beautiful cleaned fish.

He tossed one of the brookies to the sow, and she immediately dropped onto all fours, landing a paw on the tail of the fish and pulling it apart, devouring it head first. “That is much better for you; you are going into the winter’s sleep soon and need to eat healthfully.”

The younger bears took notice, but by the time they got to their mother she had already eaten the fish; then all three looked up at the Cheyenne Nation in expectation, Henry slowly creeping forward, calling up to the ranger. “Hey Chuck, I am not sure if these are brownies or brookies and whether we have sixteen apiece of the one and three of the other; do you want to check them?”

Coon called back. “Ha. Ha.”

Henry pulled another trout from the tray and tossed it away from the facility. One of the adolescents ran after it, then he tossed another for the second, and finally another for the sow. Slowly, the Bear led the bears toward Crazy Woman Creek and away from Chuck Coon and Andrea Napier.

After a few moments, I slid back in the window of Rezdawg, climbed out, and held the door open for Vic. We walked around the front of the truck so as not to interrupt Henry’s progress with the three bears and approached the structure, marveling at the effort it must’ve taken to get atop the thing. “Jeez, Chuck, how did you get up there?”

He gestured toward the woman, who was clutching the vent stack that protruded from the roof. “She was first, and then she helped me up.” He stuck out a pant leg with a shredded cuff and a little blood on the sock and hiking boot. “I barely made it; no pun intended.”

I reached up and gestured for Ms. Napier to ease herself off the roof and lowered her to the ground. She was a handsome thing, outdoorsy and athletic looking with red hair and a slight sunburn, just the kind of woman you might want to be stuck on a roof with, actually.

She adjusted her cat’s eye glasses and glanced past me toward the high willows of the creek bed. “Aren’t you worried about your friend?”

“Not really, unless he decides to go off and hibernate with them.”

“What’ll he do when he’s out of fish?”

I smiled. “That’ll take awhile.”

“I can’t believe we were attacked by bears.”

Vic laughed, and I explained. “I don’t think you were really attacked—anyway, you’re in bear country, so you need to wear bear bells and carry pepper spray.”

“Were those grizzlies?”

I shook my head. “No, those were black bears, but some of the old-timers say there are a few grizzlies still up here in the Bighorns.”

“How do you tell the difference?”

“The scat, usually; black bears are omnivores and their scat generally has berries, nuts, foliage . . .”

“And grizzlies?”

Vic chimed in with the response. “Their scat usually has bells in it and smells like pepper.”

“Hey, can I get a hand here?”

I looked up at Chuck. “I nearly forgot about you.” I reached up, and taking my one hand, he jumped down to the ground and then straightened his duty belt and flat-brimmed Smokey Bear hat with a sense of self-assurance. Chuck, like me, wasn’t built for running and climbing.

“Good thing you came along.”

I nodded. “They probably saw your hat and thought you were one of them.”

“Very funny.”

“Besides, we heard your call.”

I watched as the young woman walked around a bit, keeping her eyes in the direction in which the Cheyenne Nation had disappeared. I turned back to the game ranger. “What’s going on, Chuck?”

He gestured toward his truck, probably anxious to get near his vehicle. “Maybe I should let her explain.”

The four of us made the short walk to the half-ton and stopped by the cab to listen to Ms. Napier as she folded her arms and shuddered. “I’ve never seen anything like it, it just came up from underneath me in an explosion and I ran out of there.”

Vic looked between the two of them. “Wait, there was a bear in the restroom?”

The woman looked embarrassed. “I’m not sure what it was.”

I gestured toward the structure. “But something attacked you in there?”

“Yes.”

“Before or after the bears?”

She sighed. “I was inside, hiding from the bears when I thought well, you know, I’d take advantage. I’ve learned in Wyoming you do that ’cause you never know when you’ll have the chance next.”

I turned to Chuck. “And where did you come into all this?”

He reached in, turned off his light bar, and shut the door of his truck. Leaning against it, he offered the forest service water bottle to Andrea; it appeared that the two of them had gotten along in their time on the roof.

“I pulled in when I saw the bears around the toilet and got out of my vehicle just as she came blowing out the door of the convenience—scared the bears off long enough for her to get to me but then they saw her and I guess they figured she had more caramel corn and took off after both of us.” He nodded toward his truck. “We tried to get in here but they had

gotten between us and the truck, so we had to make for the nearest building. Andrea said she wouldn't go back inside, bears or no bears, so we climbed on top."

Vic chimed in after glancing around, but we couldn't see the Bear or the bears. "I bet that was a short conversation."

The ranger looked at his wristwatch. "I figured we were going to have to wait till the septic service got here to pump this one out for the winter—it's due in about twenty minutes or so."

Ms. Napier looked a little disgruntled. "Look, are you people going to do something about this?"

Chuck glanced at me, having the response I normally had to people who referred to me or mine as *you people*, but then his voice became playful and it was obvious he was flirting with the woman. "Well, the first thing I'm going to do is write you a citation for fifty dollars if this is your first offense in feeding bears, two hundred if it's your second, but if it's your third, the fine goes up to a thousand and six months of jail time." He acted as if he was going to pull out a pencil and his citation booklet. "So which is it, first, second, or third?"

The woman stared at him and then smiled. "My first."

"So you saw it, whatever it was in the restroom?"

She shook her head at me. "Not really."

"And the culprit is still in there?" I shared a look with Chuck and Vic and the three of us glanced back at the Porta Potty. "You've got it locked in the john?"

The ranger threw a thumb toward the woman. "Whatever it was, it appears to have attacked this lady in situ."

My undersheriff snickered. "You're kidding."

The woman stepped from one foot to the next. "Look, you might think this is funny . . ." I held up a hand in my best cop manner, but she wasn't stopping. "It scratched my ass all to pieces, and I still have to go."

None of us were quite sure what to say to that, but Chuck jumped in with what he thought was the obvious. "Well, just go over to those trees near the hillside."

She interrupted this time. "No way." She glanced at the creek and then at him as if the answer should've been obvious. "Bears."

We all turned and looked at the campground bathroom.

. . .

It was really unfair to call it a Porta Potty. It was actually much more than that—what they call in the literature a self-contained, free-standing restroom facility; it sat on a concrete pad in the national forest and was made of heavy wood with a lower foundation of masonry and river rock. With a short overhang and shallow shingled roof it must've been a chore

to climb onto even if you had opposable thumbs, but its construction was responsible for saving Coon and the young woman from being further molested by ursa trio.

I was the most curious to see what might be in there, so I was the one elected to grip the metal handle of the forest service convenience and open the door. I'd placed an ear against it but hadn't heard anything. "Is everybody ready?"

"Wait. Where are the bears?" Andrea was standing back near Chuck's truck with the door open so she could get in quickly should the need arise.

I gestured toward the small valley leading up into the true high country. "I saw Henry a good quarter mile away leading them across the creek."

She looked unsure. "What if there's another one in there?"

I shook my head. "I don't think they would leave one behind; besides, if it was a bear we'd have heard something by now." I glanced at the building. "Whatever it is, it's not making much noise."

Chuck and I stood in front of the door as Vic stepped to the other side, reaching under her Flyers sweatshirt and drawing her sidearm from a hideout holster at her hip. When I looked at her, she shrugged. "Fuck it; we don't know what's in there."

I sighed, pulled the lever, and yanked the door wide.

Empty.

There was a large scarf lying on the concrete floor of the small structure but nothing else out of the ordinary. Vic, with the 9mm extended, moved forward and looked inside like she was part of a SWAT team. "Clear."

Chuck and I, still seeing nothing, both stepped forward and looked up and down in the confined space.

I picked up the finely made copper-colored scarf and held it up showing it to the woman, still standing by Coon's truck. "This yours?"

"Yes. I'm a costumer in Los Angeles—you know, TV and stuff. I knit."

"Do you want to come and get it?"

"Not really."

I nodded and threw the thing over my shoulder as Chuck stepped closer, taking a better look around the interior of the enclosure. After a moment, I peered into the hole of the throne. I gestured at his belt and when he tried to hand me his sidearm, I shook my head and pointed at the flashlight on his hip.

Coon slid the Mag-Lite from its holder and handed it to me; I clicked it on and shined the beam into the vault below.

An eerie sound echoed from the toilet. "*Who-who-who-whoo-whoo-whooo . . .*"

The ranger looked at me. "Owl?"

Holding the smell at bay by placing my leather jacket sleeve under my nose, I moved the beam around carefully, finally stopping when a pair of golden eyes looked back at me.

"Who-who-who-whoo-whoo-whooo . . ."

Vic had come up beside me and peered into the vault. "How the hell did it get in there?"

Chuck looked around the enclosure, but the windows and the door looked sound. Stepping the rest of the way out, he glanced up at the vent stack on the roof and pointed. "Through there; some owls are cavity nesters and they look for dark, confined spaces for nesting and roosting. This one must've gone in through the vent and got stuck." He sighed. "Thousands of owls die in these exact conditions. The Teton Raptor Center in Jackson has a program that puts screening over the restroom vents to keep the things from getting killed, but I guess they haven't gotten to the Bighorns yet."

The Napier woman called out from the truck. "What is it?"

"An owl."

She looked at me, a little incredulous. "In the toilet?"

"It would appear."

"Well, can you get it out?"

I shined the Mag-Lite back into the vault. "My arms aren't long enough."

I glanced at Vic, but she shook her head. "If you can't reach him, there's no way I can."

Coon glanced at his wristwatch again. "The honey wagon is going to be here anytime now." He stepped outside and fetched a large rock to prop open the restroom door. "Sorry, I can't take the smell."

"What will they do?"

"They'll pump the thing out."

"With the owl in there."

"Yeah." He glanced through the open doorway "The only thing they could do is pump the vault out there on the ground." He made a face. "But I'm not telling them to do that in a national forest; besides, the bird wouldn't make it anyway."

Napier had crept closer—I guess she decided that danger from the owl wasn't imminent. "Look, I'm going to get out of here and go find another toilet, but I have no idea where there is one. Can somebody show me?"

Chuck paused for a moment and then shrugged. "Duty calls."

"You're leaving?"

He started toward his truck. "I'll run her down to Lost Cabin Campground and then I'll try and come back, okay?"

. . .

"Motherfucker." Vic looked at me as the ranger turned his truck around and Ms. Napier followed him up the road in her vehicle. "How about a stick?"

I sighed and walked toward the barrow ditch, found a likely limb about as big around as one of my fingers, and returned to the restroom. I leaned over the toilet and gingerly poked the stick down into the vault, careful to avoid the livid, round, iridescent eyes that continued to watch my every move.

Heck, I'd be angry stuck in there, too.

I adjusted the stick and slowly brought it over to where I thought the owl was, felt a brief tug, and then heard a sharp snap. Feeling nothing more on the stick, I pulled it out and looked at the broken end. "Yikes."

Vic peered into the darkness of the vault. "I'm not sticking my hand or anything else in there where that damn thing can get at it."

I turned to see the Cheyenne Nation approaching from the willows near the creek with the now empty plastic tray in his hand. "What is going on?"

"There's an owl in there."

He tossed the tray onto the hood of his truck and continued toward us. "What kind?"

"An angry one." Vic looked past him. "Where are the bears?"

"Up the creek; I took them past where the water is more swift and then climbed across on a fallen tree. I do not think they will go to the trouble of doubling back—they are pretty full of fish."

I glanced in the hole. "We're trying to figure out how to get him out of here."

He looked at my shoulder. "Nice scarf." I'd forgotten to give the costumer back her accessory.

"Who-who-who-who-who-who . . ."

Henry leaned over the throne, and I clicked on the Mag-Lite, giving him a clearer view. He breathed out a breath through puckered lips. "Whew . . . great horned owl, princess of the Camp of the Dead."

"Princess?"

He nodded. "It is a juvenile female."

Vic leaned in. "Now how the hell do you know that?"

The Cheyenne Nation smiled. "The call, it is distinctively feminine."

My undersheriff shook her head. "Distinctively screwed is what she is."

Henry looked at me, and I filled him in. "The sewage people are going to be here any minute, and they're going to pump the vault out, owl and all."

The Bear straightened, and it was not unlike the other bear on-the-fight that we'd just confronted. "You cannot do that."

"Henry . . ."

"This may not simply be an owl."

I shook my head at the ridiculousness of the situation. "Henry, nobody wants to see this owl killed, but . . ."

"She may simply be a Messenger from the Camp of the Dead, but she may be something else as well." He took a deep breath and tried to explain. "Within my nation there are traditional beliefs that certain people, both male and female, who practice Medicine are believed to have the ability to shape-shift, and the form they choose most is that of an owl so that they might move silently through the night and cast spells on people while they are asleep and vulnerable to spiritual forces."

Vic looked at the Bear, then at me, and then back to the big Cheyenne. "If that's the way you're trying to convince us to save her, it isn't working."

"Among my people there is only one owl even considered to be a bird and that is the short-eared owl or snake-eating-owl, an important source of medicinal power for shamans." He pointed toward the toilet. "But this is not that type of owl, so it is *Mista*, or a spirit-of-the-night. Even the *Hohnuhke*, the Cheyenne Contraries of the buffalo days, wore the feathers of the owl but never that of the great horned or the screech—their power is too strong. So it was lesser owl feathers that were attached to the warrior's shield, lance, or headdress to protect them, help them to see in the dark and make them deadly silent."

Vic shrugged. "Well, this one's going to be silent but deadly here in a few minutes."

Henry held up a hand. "I am not a shaman and cannot tell the difference between the Messenger and an ordinary owl, but the holy men and women frequently seek spiritual help from these owls in conjunction with healing practices. It is believed that the owl has medicinal powers, soft and gentle, similar to their feathers."

I held up the stick and showed him the broken end. "Soft and gentle? She did this."

He shook his head in dismissal. "This is a young great horned owl and most likely the spirit of a transformed holy person, the unquiet spirit of the dead. The tufts on their heads are symbolic of horns, the signs of spiritual beings like the horned water serpents or chiefs of the underworld." He glanced at me as if there were more, more that he did not want to say. "Or, it is possible this owl is something else."

"What?"

"Being as young as she is . . ."

"What?"

He sighed and looked directly at me. "The Spirit Messenger of an unborn soul, the herald of a young one who has yet to enter this world."

I thought about Cady, my pregnant daughter. "You can't be serious."
"I am."

Vic folded her arms and leaned against the inside wall. "Oh, now for

fuck's sake."

His face was still in all seriousness. "In my belief this *Mista* or *Hiha'n Winu'cala* is the spirit of . . ."

I could feel a shudder run through me, and I thought about all the prophecies that Virgil White Buffalo, the last shaman I had encountered in these mountains, had made concerning my daughter and granddaughter. "My granddaughter."

"Lola?" Vic ventured.

"Exactly."

I looked at the two of them. "We have to save this owl."

Vic stared back at me. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Maybe, but we have to save this owl."

She shot a look up at the Bear. "Look, no offense, Henry . . ." His eyes clicked to mine. "If you believe this mumbo-jumbo that's fine, but I don't see how we're going to do it before the shit wagon gets here."

I reached over and lifted the lid—the diameter of the formed plastic stool was about eighteen inches across at the widest part from front to back. "We have to try and get in there."

She made a face. "And then what?"

I pulled the copper-colored scarf from my shoulders. "We can use this to wrap around her so that she doesn't attack and then scoop her out." Ignoring the smell, I stooped by the toilet and reached in with both arms, my progress impeded where the width of my shoulders lodged against the edge of the plastic sides. "Unh-uh." I looked up at the Cheyenne Nation, but knew his shoulders were every bit as large as my own; finally, the two of us looked at Victoria Moretti.

She didn't move. "No fucking way."

"We can grab you by your ankles . . ."

"And kiss my ass! There's no way I'm crawling into that thing."

Henry leaned forward to get her attention, demonstrating the technique by raising his arms in a diving position. "If you raise your arms." He demonstrated. "It will narrow your shoulder width, and we can lower you in."

She went so far as to rest her hand on her high-riding sidearm. "I'm not toilet diving for an owl."

I stood and gestured toward both Henry and me. "We don't fit."

"Yeah, well I don't give a rat's ass."

I placed an arm across the open doorway. "With both of us holding on to you, there's no way anything can happen."

She folded her arms. "I'm not climbing in that toilet." Her eyes flicked between us, and I could tell she was weakening, probably thinking of the things I had told her that Virgil White Buffalo had said. She took a deep breath and gagged a little at the smell but began unbuckling her belt, unclipped her holstered Glock, and lowering it to the ground, and began

pulling her iPod, pens, notepads, keys, sunglasses, and other assorted items from her pockets. Pausing in the action, she shot a finger at the two of us. “You drop me, and we’re all three going to be in a world of shit.”

. . .

“What do you weigh, Vic?”

“Fuck you, that’s what I weigh.”

I glanced at the Cheyenne Nation and he nodded, both of us figuring we could handle her amount of weight all day without any problems. I handed Vic the scarf, which luckily was made of surprisingly thick yarn. “I’d wrap this around her as quickly as I could just to make sure she doesn’t get at you.”

She pulled on the gloves she’d retrieved from the cab of Rezdawg, a wise precaution to all our thoughts. “You’re damn right.”

Henry glanced into the hole and then stooped to pick Vic’s sunglasses from her pile. “You might want to wear these.”

She looked at the Bear. “That is a pair of two-hundred-and-twenty dollar Oakley Fast Jacket sunglasses, and I am not about to lose them in there—anyway, don’t you think it’s going to be dark enough?”

Henry unfolded the expensive eyewear. “I would want some eye protection, if I were you.”

Vic took the sunglasses and reluctantly put them on. “If I drop them, I’m going to want to fish them out.”

The Bear nodded. “Deal.”

Vic walked over and stood in front of the toilet, and I clicked on the game warden’s Mag-Lite to check on the location of the owl—she hadn’t moved. “You want me to try and hold the flashlight while . . . ?”

Her voice went up a few octaves in response. “You fucking well better hold on to me; I don’t want you assholes concentrating on anything other than hanging on to my legs and not letting go!”

“Right.”

She glanced up at me. “I’m serious.”

“I can tell.” I looked at the hole and added, “I would be, too.”

She stared into the abyss. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“It is for a greater cause.” Henry placed a hand on her shoulder. “I would also keep my mouth closed.”

Vic looked at him, smiled a fake smile, reached over, and unrolled a few sections of toilet paper, rolling them into impromptu nose plugs, and stuffing them into her nostrils; then she held her hands up and wrapped the scarf between both of them. “Ready.”

Henry and I reached down and gripped her legs at the knees and ankles. We easily lifted her and flipped her over. “You okay?”

She nodded, and we began lowering her into the vault, outstretched

arms and the scarf first. There was a fluttering noise, and Vic struggled, but our grip remained firm. “What’s happening?”

Her voice, muffled and nasal, echoed up from the chamber. “She’s moved over to the other side. Can you turn me so I’m facing her more?”

The Bear and I looked at each other, trying to imagine how we were going to accomplish that; finally Henry straddled the back of the toilet and stepped over as I pivoted to the right. “That better?”

There was another fluttering from below, and Vic’s voice sounded against the concrete that was underneath the floor. “I think. It’s so dark down here I can’t see anything..” There was a pause, and then she spoke again. “You’re going to have to lower me more; I can’t reach into the corner where I think she is.”

“How much?”

The voice echoed up. “Maybe another foot—but no more than that.”

“Right.”

Henry and I started lowering her when she called out. “Stop!”

“Right.”

“It’s going to take me a minute to get ready, so just hold me here.”

The Cheyenne Nation and I stood over the toilet with Vic Moretti’s feet in our faces, and I thought that even her feet smelled nice, but maybe it was comparative to the environs. There wasn’t much else to do, so I broached the subject again. “Lola?”

He nodded with a sense of finality, the kind of finality that usually meant The Greatest Legal Mind of Our Time had made up her mind. “Lola, short for Delores, taken from the title of the Virgin Mary: Virgen Maria de los Delores.”

“Our Lady of Sorrows?”

He thought about it. “Well, yes . . . technically.”

Vic’s voice echoed up again. “Great, that can be her stage name.”

He shook his head at me, and we felt Vic move in our hands again, probably preparing for the monumental grab. “You still all right?”

Her voice echoed up again. “Hang on—this might get a little hairy here in a second.”

“Okay.” I gripped my undersheriff’s leg a little tighter. Henry grunted. I looked up at him. “What?”

His dark eyes rested easy on mine. “What what?”

“You said something?”

“No.”

I shrugged but then heard the grunt again, this time while looking directly at his face—his mouth hadn’t moved. Both of us looked at each other with eyebrows raised before pivoting our heads in unison toward the propped open door of the restroom where the sow black bear was sniffing the ground just off the concrete pad. “Vic . . .”

“Hold it steady, I’m making my move . . .”

The black bear raised her head up and looked into the restroom at the sound of my voice. You really don't get a sense of how big the things are until you're up close and personal with them. The sow was roughly our height, but the months of summer bounty had helped her to pack on the weight, and I was betting she weighed as much as Henry and me together. Their eyesight isn't the greatest, but their sense of smell is extremely acute and the things that repulse us smell like the Usual at the Busy Bee Café to them.

I spoke voce sotto. "I thought you said they wouldn't double back?"

The Bear's whisper was low and steady. "They did not, but evidently she did."

"I think we should pull Vic out."

"I agree."

We were about to do it when Vic made her move, a jarring lunge that made for a mad fluttering and some vicious swearing along with a certain amount of animation translating up her legs to us.

The sow huffed a few breaths and then moved as she'd done when we pulled up in Rezdawg; she bounced twice and stood up to her full height, the bunching of muscle mass in her shoulders and back threatening without so much as a gesture. I'd heard it said that the beasts were about six times as powerful as a man and looking at the sheer girth of her, I didn't have many doubts—it also meant that Henry and I were outmanned by four.

She sniffed the air again and peered into the semidarkness of the enclosure, perhaps four yards between us.

I spoke as quietly as I could. "Henry?"

"Do not move."

Vic's voice rose again at our boots, a little more frantic this time. "I've got her! I've got her! Pull me up before she gets away, damn it!"

I figured I could get at my sidearm, even holding Vic, since I had Henry's help, even if all I wanted to do was fire off a warning shot. The bear cocked her head like a dog, and all I could think was that as horrible as Vic's predicament was, she was the one most likely to survive this situation without getting mauled.

Vic kicked a little. "Hey, get me the hell out of here!"

The bear took a step toward us, still sniffing the air.

I spoke through the side of my mouth. "Vic, stop kicking and . . ."

"What? Hey, this bitch bird is sinking its claws into my boobs!"

The sow took another step toward us, chuffing and ducking her head down like she might charge.

The Bear's voice remained calm. "She will bluff at least once, maybe twice, before she really charges, if she does."

"Ouch, damn it! Motherfuckers, this isn't funny!"

I continued speaking out of the side of my mouth. "Do you think if she

realizes there are three of us, she might back down?"

"That or we can feed her Vic."

The sow lunged forward, even going so far as to swipe one of the support poles at the edge of the pad, which sent a shudder through the structure. At the same time, we yanked as hard as we could, sending my undersheriff up and out of the hole. The bundle she was carrying exploded in a flurry of copper yarn and wing flapping as the great horned owl wasted no time in freeing itself, sending Vic to the floor and the two of us against the walls.

Up close, she was an amazing thing to see—the radiating feathers splayed out like a serrated sunburst, and even though she was only an adolescent, her wings seemed to fill the room. Three powerful swoops, and she levitated and blew out the open door straight into the bear.

It was as if Henry's prophecies had come true and a possessed soul of the underworld had exploded from the depth with all the fury of a feathered banshee.

The sow didn't know what hit her, and she didn't care; as soon as the owl started out, the bear beat a hasty retreat as fast as four legs could carry her and the last we saw of her she was headed through the red willow thickets and back up the valley.

We all lay there in the aftermath, Vic looking like she'd had the worst of it, her face still red from hanging upside down for so long. "What the hell just happened?"

I looked through the open doorway and could see the scarf reflecting copper on the ground between us and Henry's truck, but there was no sign of the owl; it was as if she had simply disappeared.

I glanced at the Cheyenne Nation, and watched as he walked out of the structure and kneeled in the gravel out front, carefully picking up an extended brown and white feather, rolling the quill of it between between thumb and forefinger. "I think we just witnessed the *Mista*."

Vic felt her head, glanced around on the floor, and then looked back at the toilet. "I think I dropped my sunglasses."

. . .

Coasting to let Rezdawg's brakes cool on the slow drive down the mountain, Henry and I discussed the finer points of what had happened and their exact meanings. Vic ignored us and continued listening to her music

"So, you think the owl was there to save us?"

"I do."

"And that it was a herald of my granddaughter?"

"Possibly." He nodded curtly, as if the question was settled. "It is their connection with death, the afterlife and rebirth, that mark the owl as an

embodiment of spirits; I think she was the herald at the fork of the Hanging Road, the Milky Way, which leads to the Camp of the Dead. She has the power to decide who shall pass and who will be stillborn or condemned to wander the earth as spirits or *wana'gi* forever. The *Mista* or *Hiha'n Winu'cala* is responsible for this transition, and you must cry your name to her and she assesses the merit of your attached soul. If you have a good name, you may pass the junction of the fork, but if your name is bad, you are shunted onto a dead-end branch."

Vic, her earbuds back in and her eyes closed, continued to ignore us, and I leaned a little forward so that I could see the Bear. "So, according to Cheyenne beliefs you have a name before you arrive in this world?"

"Yes. We always have a name, both before and after our time here."

"Can you change your name?"

He nodded. "Yes, but you risk changing your path, and the *Mista* or *Hiha'n Winu'cala* may deny you."

"You mean not let you in or out of the world?"

"Yes. It can be complicated." He sighed as he pulled back out onto the main road in a low gear, lugging Rezdawg down the mountain as his fingers came up to stroke the feather, now hanging from his rearview mirror. "My father lived with death for a very long time, and I remember the night he died a great horned owl was sitting on the poles of our family teepee outside the house. When I would go and visit his grave, there was always an owl feather there and still is today."

I was about to say something more when Vic, who had adjusted her iPod, leaned forward and began drumming on the dash very softly.

Lola, Lo-lo-lo-lo-Lola . . .

Lola.

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SERPENT'S TOOTH, AVAILABLE FROM VIKING IN
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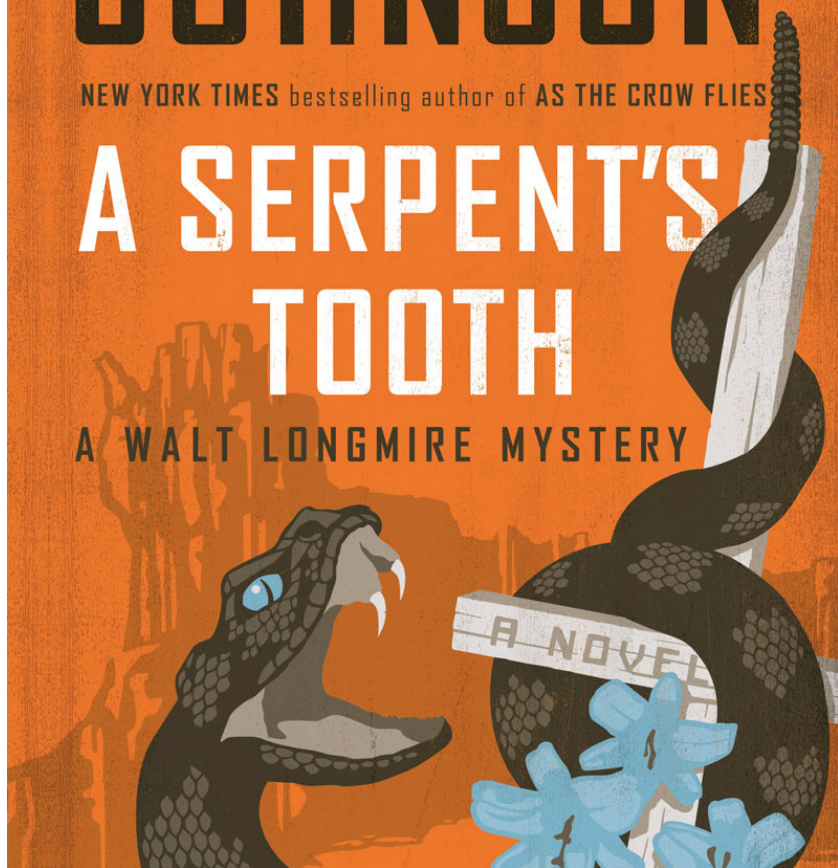
LONGMIRE, THE HIT **A&E** DRAMA SERIES

CRAIG JOHNSON

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author of AS THE CROW FLIES

A SERPENT'S TOOTH

A WALT LONGMIRE MYSTERY



1

I stared at the black-and-orange corsage on Barbara Thomas's lapel so that I wouldn't have to look at anything else.

I don't like funerals, and a while ago I just stopped going to them. I think the ceremony is a form of denial, and when my wife died and my daughter, Cady, informed me that she was unaware of any instance where going to somebody's funeral ever brought them back, I just about gave it up.

Mrs. Thomas had been the homecoming queen when Truman made sure that the buck stopped with him, which explained the somewhat garish ornament pinned on her prim and proper beige suit. Next week was the big game between the Durant Dogies and their archrival, the Worland Warriors, and the whole town was black-and-orange crazy.

The only thing worse than going to the funeral of someone you knew is going to the funeral of a person you didn't; you get to stand there and be told about somebody you had never met, and all I ever feel is that I missed my chance.

I had missed my chance with Dulcie Meriwether, who had been one of Durant's fine and upstanding women—after all, I'm the sheriff of Absaroka County, so the fine and upstanding often live and pass beyond my notice. On a fine October afternoon I leaned against the railing leading to the First Methodist Church, not so much to praise Dulcie Meriwether—or to bury her—but rather to talk about angels.

I reached out and straightened Barbara Thomas's corsage.

One of the jobs of an elected official in Wyoming is to understand one's constituency and listen to people—help them with their problems—even if they're bat-shit crazy. I was listening to Barbara tell me about the angels who were currently assisting her with home repair, which I took as proof that she had passed the entrance exam to that particular belfry.

I glanced at Mike Thomas, who had asked me to bushwhack his aunt on this early high plains afternoon. He wanted me to talk to her and

figured the only way he could arrange running into me was by having me stand outside the church and wait for the two of them as they departed for a late lunch after the service.

I was trying not to look at the other person leaning on the railing with me, my undersheriff, Victoria Moretti, who, although she was trying to work off a hangover from too much revelry at the Basque Festival bacchanal the night before, had decided to take advantage of my being in town on a Sunday. The only person left to look at was Barbara, eighty-two years old, platinum hair coiffed to perfection, and, evidently, mad as a hatter.

"So, when did the angels pitch in and start working around your place, Mrs. Thomas?"

"Call me Barbara, Walter." She nodded her head earnestly, as if she didn't want us to think she was crazy.

As Vic would say, "Good luck with that."

"About two weeks ago I made a little list and suddenly the railing on the front porch was fixed." She leveled a malevolent glance at the well-dressed cowboy in the navy blazer and tie to my left, her youngest nephew. "It's difficult to get things done around home since Michael lives so far away."

As near as I could remember, Mike's sculpture studio was right at the edge of town, and I knew he lived only two miles east, but that was between the two of them. I adjusted the collar of my flannel shirt, enjoying the fact that I wasn't in uniform today, figuring it was going to be the extent of my daily pleasure. "So, the angels came and fixed the railing?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

She nodded again, enthusiastically. "Lots of things—they unclogged my gutters, rehung the screen door on the back porch, and fixed the roof on the pump house."

Vic sighed. "Jesus, you wanna send 'em over to my place?"

I ignored my undersheriff, which was difficult to do. She was wearing a summer dress in an attempt to forestall the season, and a marvelous portion of her tanned legs was revealed above her boots and below the hem. "Have you ever actually seen the angels, Mrs. Thomas?"

"Barbara, please." She shook her head, indulging my lack of knowledge of all things celestial. "They don't work that way."

"So, how do they work?"

She placed the palms of her hands together and leaned forward. "I make my little list, and the things just get done. It's a sign of divine providence."

Vic mumbled under her breath. "It's a sign of divine senility."

Barbara Thomas continued without breaking stride. "I have a notebook

where I number the things that have to be done in order of importance, then I leave it on the room divider and presto.” She leaned back and beamed at me. “He works in mysterious ways.” She paused for a moment to glance at the church looming over my shoulder and then altered the subject. “You used to go to services here, didn’t you, Walter?”

“Yes, ma’am, I used to accompany my late wife.”

“But you haven’t been since she passed away?”

I took a deep breath to relieve the tightness in my chest the way I always did when anybody brought up the subject of Martha. “No, ma’am. We had an agreement that she’d take care of the next world if I took care of this one.” I glanced at Mike as he smoothed his mustache and tried not to smile. “And there seems to be enough to hold my attention here lately.” I turned my eyes back to her. “So you haven’t ever seen them?”

“Seen who?”

“The holy handymen, for Christ’s sake.”

Barbara looked annoyed. “Young lady, you need to watch your language.”

I drew Barbara’s attention away from a sure-shot, head-on, verbal train wreck. “So you haven’t actually seen the angels then?”

“No.” She thought about it and stared at the cracks in the sidewalk, the strands of struggling grass having abandoned the hope of pushing through. “They do take some food out of the icebox every now and again.”

I kept my eyes on her. “Food?”

“Yes.” She thought some more. “And they sometimes take a shower.”

“A shower.”

She was nodding again. “But they always clean up after themselves; I just notice because the towels are damp or there are a few pieces of fried chicken missing.”

I shot Mike a look, but he was studying the banks of Clear Creek on the other side of the gravel walk a little ways away, probably checking for trout and wishing he was somewhere else. My eyes tracked back to the elderly woman. “Fried chicken.”

“Yes, it would appear that angels really like Chester’s fried chicken.”

I leaned back on the railing and watched the dancing pattern of light on the water for a while myself, the scattered golden leaves of the aspens spinning like a lost flotilla. “I see.”

“And Oreos; the angels like Double Stuf Oreos, too.”

“Anything else?”

“Vernors Diet Ginger Ale.”

“You must be running up quite a grocery bill feeding the legions.” I smiled and chose my next words carefully. “Barbara, when these things happen . . . I mean, do you make your list and then go to bed and get up and everything is repaired?”

“Oh no, I do my agenda in the morning, then I go out to run my errands or go to my bridge club, and when I get back everything’s done.”

“In the morning?”

“By the middle of the afternoon, yes.”

I pulled out my pocket watch and looked at it, noticing it was ten after one. “So if I were to head over to your place right now, it’s likely that I might catch the angels at their labors?”

She looked a little worried. “I suppose.”

“What is it you’ve got them doing today?”

She thought. “There’s a leak in the trap under the kitchen sink.”

Vic couldn’t hold her peace. “Wait, angels work on Sundays?”

I looked at the nice but crazy old lady. “Where do they get parts on a Sunday; Buell Hardware is closed.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I get them the supplies, Walter. The Lord provides, but I don’t think that extends to plumbing parts.”

“Hmm . . .” I stood up, and she looked concerned.

“Where are you going?”

“I think I’ll drive by your place while you and Mike have lunch.” I shrugged. “Maybe see if we can get Vic here a little divine guidance.”

Barbara Thomas folded her hands like broken-winged birds and spoke in a quiet voice. “I’d rather you didn’t, Walter.”

I waited a moment and then asked, “And why is that?”

She paused, just a little petulant, and then looked up at me with damp eyes. “They do good works, and you shouldn’t interrupt good works.”

. . .

“Do you think there are more crazy people in our county than anywhere else?”

We drove west of town in the direction of Barbara Thomas’s house, and I turned down the air in the Bullet so that the fan would not blow Vic’s dress any higher on her smooth thighs as she propped her cowboy boots on the escarpment of the dash. “Per capita?”

“In general.”

I redirected a vent in the direction of Dog, panting in the backseat. “Well, nature hates a vacuum and strange things are drawn into empty places; sometimes oddities survive where nothing else can.” I glanced over at her. “Why?”

“That would include us?”

“Technically.”

She glanced out the windshield, her face a little troubled. “I don’t want to end up alone in a house making lists for my imaginary friends.”

I took a left onto Klondike Drive and thought about how Vic had seemed to be given to philosophical musings as of late. “Somehow, I don’t

see that happening.”

She glanced at me. “I noticed you didn’t offer to share your experiences with the spirit world with her.”

Vic was referring to the events in the Cloud Peak Wilderness Area that I’d had in the spring, an experience I wasn’t sure I’d even fully processed yet. “It didn’t seem pertinent.”

“Uh-huh.”

I gave her a look back and noticed she was massaging one temple with her fingers. “How’s your head?”

“Like hell, thanks for asking.”

“You mind if I inquire as to what happened at the Basque Festival?”

She adjusted her boots on the dash and confessed. “I was traumatized.”

“By what?”

“The running of the sheep.”

I thought I must’ve misheard. “The what?”

“The running of the fucking sheep, which you conveniently missed by taking the day off yesterday.”

“The running of the sheep?”

She massaged the bridge of her nose. “You heard me.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it; you don’t want to talk about your imaginary friends, and I don’t want to talk about the running of the sheep.” She played with the pull strap on her boot. “Suffice to say that I am not working the Basque Festival ever again.”

I shrugged as we passed the YMCA and continued down the hill and past Duffy, the vintage locomotive in the park at the children’s center. I took a right on Upper Clear Creek Road, then pulled up and parked under the shade of a yellowing cottonwood next to Barbara Thomas’s mailbox.

“We’re walking?”

“There’s shade here, and Dog is hot.” I lowered the windows to give him a little extra air. “Besides, I like to sneak up on my angels. How about you?”

She cracked open the passenger-side door and slipped out, pulling her skirt down. Boots and short skirts—a look for which I held a great weakness. “I’m not exactly dressed for a footrace.”

I closed the door quietly and moved around to the front of the truck to meet her. “I thought angels flew.”

“Yeah, and shit floats.”

. . .

We walked down the steep gravel driveway that ended in one of those old-time Model T garages and the tiny clapboard house that had been the

headquarters for the T Bar T Ranch in years past, before housing developments had chiseled the land away. There was an abundance of raised flower beds and hanging baskets, and I had to admit that whoever the angels were; they were doing a heck of a job, especially this late in the season.

Her tarnished gold eyes flashed. "By the book?"

I looked at her lupine smile and thought about how you could take the patrolman out of South Philadelphia, but you couldn't take the South Philly out of the patrolman. "Look, it's probably some kindhearted neighbor doing the old girl a favor, so let's not scare them to death, okay?"

"Whatever." She started for the porch, and I watched the faded purple dress flounce from her hips as she stalked off, unarmed. "Calling front."

I sighed and started around the back, slipping between the tiny garage and the house. I looked in the kitchen window and paused when I saw a set of legs sticking out from under the open cabinet doors of the sink. Covering the legs were a pair of olive green work pants, the kind custodians wear, and the feet were encased in a pair of heavy brogans without socks.

I shook my head and continued on, wondering which Good Samaritan from the neighborhood this might be. I climbed the concrete stoop that led into the kitchen, pushed the button on the newly rehung screen door, and announced myself. "All right, mysterious home repair, who's . . ."

My voice plugged in my throat when an extremely thin young man catapulted from underneath the sink and braced himself against the side-by-side refrigerator. I had a few seconds to study him—he was an odd bird, looked like a scarecrow with the oversized pants tied at the waist with a piece of hemp rope and a tan work shirt that also looked to be about two sizes too large. His eyes were the bluest blue I'd ever seen—almost cobalt, wide and deep set. He had a noble prince look about him, but maybe it was the blond, Prince Valiant haircut.

I raised a hand in assurance and unplugged my voice. "Um, howdy."

The assurance was short lived, and he leapt from the room straight into Vic, who was standing in the doorway leading to the living room and front door. He rammed his way past her, but to give her credit, even with a bloodied nose, she clung to his pant leg as he dragged her along with him. "Motherfucker!"

I made the four strides between us just as the pants slipped from his narrow hips. He darted into the living room, bounced off the room divider, and hurtled through the doorway. I watched helplessly as he skimmed off the porch and was gone like a sidewinder.

I didn't even bother pretending to chase him, went back into the kitchen, pulled a dishcloth from the stem of the spigot, and dampened it. I got some ice from the freezer and held it out to my undersheriff as she

stood and looked at me. "If I'd had my gun, I would've shot the little asshole."

"Did he hit you?"

"His knee did when he bowled me over."

Tipping her head back, I leaned her against the kitchen counter. "I don't think I've ever seen anybody that scared before in my life."

She held the cloth to her nose, muffling her voice. "Wait'll I get ahold of him again."

I stretched the cord of the rotary phone over to where she stood, called 911, and pulled the cloth away to examine the damage. It was swelling, but it didn't look as if anything was broken. "You're going to have a couple of beauties there."

The phone at my ear suddenly came alive. "Absaroka County Sheriff's Office; you have an emergency?"

"Yep, Vic is going to kill a fifteen-year-old kid."

"Sheriff?"

I listened as Ruby's phone cradle jostled on his shoulder. "Double Tough, is that you?" I never was sure who was scheduled to rotate up from Powder Junction for weekend duty since Santiago Saizarbitoria, one of my other deputies, had run off to visit family in Rawlins for a couple of weeks.

"Yup, what's up?"

"I've got a fugitive on the loose over here on Upper Clear Creek Road, and sure would appreciate it if you caught him before Vic does."

I listened as he scrambled his way around my dispatcher's desk. "What kind of fugitive, Walt?"

"Male Caucasian, approximately fifteen years of age, blond hair, blue eyes with an expression like he's cleared for takeoff—and he was."

I listened as Double Tough started to sign off. "Got it."

"One more thing."

"Yup, Chief?"

I picked up the pair of pants from the edge of the counter where I'd put them. "He's naked from the waist down."

For the first time in the conversation, my deputy was given pause. "Well, that should make things a little easier."

. . .

It didn't.

We rummaged the entire neighborhood once and then again but came up with nothing. We were in the office, where Vic sat with a sack of frozen petite peas on her nose and watched me close last year's Durant High School yearbook. "He's not in here."

She looked at me from over the bag of vegetables. "You're sure?"

“Positive.”

“You got the age right?”

“I think so.” I reached down and ruffled Dog’s ears; he liked the relative cool of my abandoned office and the quiet of a Sunday afternoon. “I guess you didn’t get a very good look at him.”

She stretched her jaw in an attempt to loosen her facial muscles and stared at the escapee’s pants on her lap. “You mean did I get the number of the skinny truck that hit me? No.”

“Then he’s from out of town.”

She studied the inside band of the pants. “Maybe.” She rested the frozen pouch on the dried bloodstains that were discoloring the neck of her dress. “What?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to get your nose X-rayed?”

She dismissed me with a flapping of her hand. “What about the kid?”

“He just seemed odd.”

The next statement fairly flooded with sarcasm. “Really?”

I conjured up the brief image of the scared young man and held it there in front of my eyes. “The way he stood there for that moment: flexing his hands repeatedly, no eye contact, on the balls of his feet . . .”

“He’s a ’tard?”

I sighed and felt the bridge of my own nose. “Just . . . odd.”

“Health Services?”

I dialed the number and listened as it transferred me to the answering machine; Nancy Griffith asked me to record a message. I declined and placed the receiver on the cradle.

I pulled the phone book from the top drawer of my desk and leafed through to the G’s. “This stuff is a lot easier when Ruby’s around.” I pinned Nancy with a forefinger and dialed. On the third ring she answered, and I described a young man she’d never seen. “You’re sure?”

“Positive. The description doesn’t match up with any of our current clients. Have you tried the Wyoming Boys’ School?”

“In Worland?”

“Stranger things have happened.” I listened as she chuckled and was reminded that she had sung in the church choir with Martha. “Hey, are you going to the football game on Friday?”

“Why, is there a problem?”

She waited a moment before responding. “Does there always have to be a problem when you’re invited somewhere?”

“Generally.”

“It’s homecoming, and they’re retiring your number.”

“Oh.”

“They’re retiring Henry Standing Bear’s number, too. Didn’t anyone get ahold of you?” There was another pause, but it wasn’t long enough for me to come up with an answer or an excuse. “I think everybody up at the

high school would appreciate it if the two of you showed up at halftime for the celebration.”

“Friday. Um . . . I’ll see what I can do. Thanks, Nance.”

I hung up the phone and watched as Vic reapplied the now-not-so-frozen peas to her nose. “What was all that about?”

“What?”

“Friday.”

“Nothing.” I continued to think about the odd young man as I looked at the Durant Dogies annual on my desk. “He’s got to live in the neighborhood.”

“Was she just asking you out on a date?”

“What?” I glanced back up at her. “No.”

Her tone became a little sharper. “Then what’s Friday?”

“A football thing; they’re going to retire my number.”

She looked amused. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Henry’s, too.”

“I wanna go.”

“No.”

“C’mon, I never got to do that crap when I was a teenager.” She thought about it. “I never dated any football guys in high school.”

I was momentarily distracted. “What kind of guys did you date?”

“Thirty-seven-year-olds named Rudy with mustaches and vans—guys that would give my parents heart attacks.” She studied me. “I wanna go, and I want a corsage, just like Babs.” I didn’t respond and slumped in my guest chair. “Please tell me we’re not going to canvas the neighborhood in the short bus with have-you-seen-this-half-naked-retard posters?”

“I thought we’d knock on a few doors.”

“That or we just bait a few Havahart traps with Double Stuf Oreos.”

She struggled to her feet. “But I don’t think we have to do that here.” She reached down and held up the inside band of the pants toward me. It read

CITY OF BELLE FOURCHE DEPARTMENT OF SANITATION.

. . .

I made a few more phone calls to the services in Butte County, South Dakota, that were open on a Sunday afternoon, but they didn’t know anything about a runaway, so we met Double Tough at the gravel turnout above the T Bar T. “Nothing?”

The ex-oil rig jockey was built like a brick pillar. When I first met him he’d been shot, something he’d neglected to mention until later in the conversation; hence, his nickname. “Nope, and I asked at every house within a quarter mile of the place.”

“Nobody’s seen him or heard of him?”

“Nope.”

I glanced down the driveway toward the little white house with the red shutters. "I'll go down and tell Barbara that I'm going to have a look. Why don't you two just hang around up here in the shade and watch Dog?"

As I walked off, I heard Double Tough ask about Vic's nose. Just because he was double tough didn't mean he was double smart. I made my way to the front porch and told Mrs. Thomas about my intentions. "You don't have to do that, Walter."

"I'd feel better if I had a look around. If you don't know this young man or anything about him, it might be best if we at least spoke with him."

She nodded but there wasn't much enthusiasm in it.

As she closed the door, I made my way across the front of the house to the small garage and entered from the side door, which was adjacent to the walkway alongside the house. There was a scary-looking 1969 Mustang convertible with badges on the side that read COBRA JET. It was semihidden underneath a car cover and was a testament to Bill Thomas's last vehicular purchase before his death in '71. The thing probably had a thousand miles on the odometer and was the lust of every driving-age male in the county.

There was a workbench to my right with an assortment of baby food jars filled with screws and nails that probably dated back to Fort Fetterman, but there were a lot of hand tools that looked as though they'd been used recently, as well as spare lumber that had been placed in the rafters, along with a hidden stack of vintage *Playboy* magazines. Other than that, the place looked undisturbed.

I closed the door behind me and remembered something Barbara had said about a pump house. We live in the high desert, and considering that the yard was very green and the flower beds abundant with blooms, I figured the water had to come from somewhere.

Following my boots down a path overgrown with wild morning glories toward the bank of Clear Creek, I veered in the direction of the bridge. I could see the pitched roof of the outbuilding that had had its shingles repaired recently and could even make out the restored patch.

The grass was higher as I cut off from the walkway, and I waded through the stalks to the small pad at the front. There was a clasp screwed into the surface of the door, but the rusted Master Lock was loose, and I unhooked it from the loop and pulled the door open with the wooden handle. It had probably been a smoke house at some point, which would explain the faint odor of charred wood—that and the rusted points in the rafters that were stained from the places where some kind of meat hook had been attached.

There was a small 2.5 horsepower irrigation pump feeding water from the creek to a system with pipes that rose up through the dirt floor and

then returned in two-inch diameters. I walked around the pump, placed my hand on the outgoing line, and felt the surge of cold water as it flowed through.

As my eyes settled in the gloom, I could see that there was a steel, fold-up bunk running along the wall on the other side—the kind people used to use for guests. There was an old military blanket on the twin mattress, tucked in so tight you could have bounced a roll of quarters off of it.

When I got to the bed, I heard a different sound under my boots and stepped back, revealing the vague outline of something square buried in the floor. I kneeled down and brushed away some of the dust. There was a small hook on one side, so I moved it and lifted the lid of what appeared to be an old milk jug container buried in the dry dirt. It was dark in the hole, and I wished I was wearing my duty belt with my trusty Maglite attached, but instead, I just stuck my hand in the submerged box.

The first thing I found was a magazine—*Gun Buyer's Annual*, this year's date. It was an encyclopedic guide to all the weapons available on the private market. The illustrations on the glossy cover, starring a collection of rifles, shotguns, semiautomatics, and radical carbines, had been thumbed away at the center where someone had spent hours studying the thing. I opened the magazine—practically every page was dog-eared.

I set it aside and reached into the hole again, this time coming up with a copy of *Playboy*, January 1972. The magazine was as worn as the gun almanac, and I had to admit that Marilyn Cole, leaning against a bookcase with a novel in her hands and little else, was still looking good considering her photo was over a quarter of a century old and folded into three equal parts.

I rested what hardly seemed to be even mild porn anymore on the stack with the gun porn and reached into the hole again, this time pulling out a moldy-looking tome—threadbare black with gold lettering—the Book of Mormon. When I carefully opened the cover, I noticed that it was published in 1859, and the handwritten inscription on the title page read “For my son Orrin, Man of God, Son of Thunder—your loving mother, Sara.”

I tucked the antiquarian book under my arm and stuck my hand back in the container in the floor but couldn't feel anything else. I looked around the place for something, anything, but there was nothing. I returned everything except the book back to the hole, closed the lid, and kicked a little dirt back over it. I stood, keeping the book with me, and walked around the pump to give the dirt-floored room one more going-over. I stepped through the door, closed it, and hooked the clasp of the lock back through the loop, careful to leave it as I'd found it.

When I got back to Barbara Thomas's home, I rapped my knuckles on the screen door and waited until Barbara appeared on the other side of

the tiny squares, her image pixelated into a thousand parts. I held up the book and asked, "Who's Orrin?"

She placed a hand against the doorjamb for support and silently put her other hand to her mouth.

. . .

"I don't know where he's from."

I watched as Double Tough took another cookie from the plate on the kitchen counter. Barbara, Vic, and I and the Book of Mormon sat at the kitchen table trying to sort things out. "Well, when was the first time you saw him?"

"Like I said, about two weeks ago."

"You also said he was an angel."

She blinked and looked out the kitchen window leading toward Clear Creek and the pump house. "I . . . I might have been confused about that."

Vic had discarded the now-thawed peas for a cold pack, and her voice was thankfully muffled through the dish towel. "Amen, sister."

"Have you spoken with him?"

"No."

"Where did he get the cot and blanket?"

She thought, as she continued to look out the window. "There were things in the garage that I noticed were missing, but I didn't really connect the two." Her eyes came back to me. "Do you really think he's been living in the pump house these last few weeks?"

"I'd say it's a safe assumption; how, exactly, have you been feeding him?"

She looked at Double Tough, still munching on a cookie. "I just leave the food on the counter."

My deputy, feeling a little self-conscious, threw out a review as he chewed. "Oatmeal-Chocolate chip, they're really good."

The older woman's eyes returned to mine. "Can't we just leave him alone?"

I cleared my throat. "Um, no, we can't. . . . He's not a stray cat, Mrs. Thomas; we've got to find out who he is and where he belongs. There might be people out there looking for him. You understand."

"I do."

I picked up the book and opened it to the title page. "A couple of assumptions I'm making are that he's Mormon and that his name is Orrin."

Vic couldn't resist. "Orrin the Mormon?"

I ignored her and continued. "I'm going to place my deputy here in your house this evening, if you don't mind, in hopes that the boy will return."

She nodded, first looking at Vic and then settling on Double Tough. "That'll be fine."

I stood and gave my Powder Junction deputy his command. "I'll come by at around eleven to spell you, if that sounds good."

He picked up another cookie and nodded. "Yup."

"And try not to eat all the cookies."

He didn't answer as he took a seat by the kitchen window, lifted his tactical binoculars to his eyes to view the pump house, and chewed.

. . .

Vic fed her uneaten pizza crust to Dog as she picked up a can from my Rainier stash and gulped. "Shit, I just wish someone around here would do decent pizza." She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and the front on Dog's head. "I checked the National Crime Information Center for info on Orrin the Mormon but so far he's about as available as the Holy Ghost. I left a message at the local Church of Latter-day Saints—who knew there was one here—with Bishop Drew Goodman and even checked with social services over in Utah, but so far nobody's ever heard of the kid."

I sipped my own beer and flipped through the pages of the Mormon bible. "This thing is probably worth a fortune."

"What about the City of Belle Fourche's traveling pants?"

I set my beer down. "I'll call over to Tim Berg—the sheriff over there—and see if he has any ideas about the pants or the kid."

She held her beer close to her lips and smiled the crocodile smile. "The human pencil holder?"

"Yep." During classes at the National Sheriffs' Association, Tim was famous for placing numerous pens and pencils in his prodigious beard and then forgetting them.

She looked up at the old Seth Thomas hanging on the wall of my office, the hands gesturing toward 10:45 like Carol Merrill from *Let's Make a Deal*. "I was thinking about hanging around and seducing you, but my nose hurts, so I might take it home and go to bed." She took another sip of her beer and then held the cool of the can to the spot between her eyes. "How do I look?"

I studied the two small wings of purple unfurling beneath her lower lids. "Like you coulda been a contendah."

"Yeah, well, if I catch Orrin the Mormon I'm going to pound his head like a friggin' bongo." She stood and stretched, the dress hem riding up her thighs as she sang in a thick Italian accent, à la Rosemary Clooney, "Come on-a my house, my house. I'm-a gonna give you candy."

I smiled up at her. "I thought your nose hurt."

She backed into my office doorway and attempted to draw me forward

by crooking an index finger. "It does, but I just remembered a great way to take my mind off it."

I gathered up the detritus of our impromptu feast, crushed a few of the cans, and tossed them into the empty box—I knew I'd catch hell from Ruby if I left beer cans in the office trash. "I've got to relieve Double Tough in twenty-five minutes."

"We could make it a quickie."

I closed the box, picked it up, and walked around my desk to meet her. "What do you hear from the newlyweds?" Her face darkened beyond the black eyes, and I suddenly realized that clouds were gathering and lightning was flashing in the tarnished gold pupils. "What?"

"I've warned you about that."

"What?"

She leaned against the door frame and downed the last of her beer. "Every time I talk about us, you talk about them." She pushed off the frame and looked up at me, placing the empty can on the flat surface of my box like a smokestack. "I'm not going to get all Freudian and try and figure that out, so just stop. Okay?"

"Okay."

She turned, walked past Ruby's desk, and paused to curtsy, her hair, which she had grown out, striped with highlights. "By the way, you lost your shot at a quickie."

She disappeared down the steps, and I heard the heavy glass doors swing shut as I called after her, "I kind of figured that."

Dog, probably hoping for another crust, appeared at my leg as I took a few steps down the hall toward the holding cells and the back door. "C'mon, you want to go to the Dumpster?" I glanced over my shoulder and noticed he'd sat. "I'll take that as a no?" He didn't move, so I continued on my own. "Well, you're going over to Barbara Thomas's place here in a few minutes whether you like it or not."

I pushed open the heavy metal and carefully nudged the broken portion of concrete block that we all used to prop open the door, which saved the staff the ignominious march around the building to the front entrance that Vic had deemed "the walk of shame and ignorance."

In the distance I could hear my undersheriff ignoring our two red-blinking traffic lights as she sped through town.

Balancing the empty Rainier on the box, I started toward the Dumpster just as a sudden breeze kicked up, which spun the can off the cardboard surface like an aluminum tumbleweed. It skittered across the street toward the fence at Meadowlark Elementary.

"Well, hell."

I continued on my way, slipped the trash under the plastic lid, and then started the trek across the street; I figured that if beer cans weren't allowed in the sheriff's office trash, they probably shouldn't linger next to

the elementary school fence either.

The little bugger was continuing to bump against the chain-link, and it took two tries before I got hold of the thing. Feeling the weight of the day, I placed an elbow on the top bar of the fence and stood there enjoying the temperature drop of the evening. It was getting late in the season, and the nights were getting cooler. I thought about what Nancy had said about the weekend, tried to remember what my number had been, and then reminded myself to call the Bear and tell him about the honors that were being bestowed on us Friday night.

I shivered just a little and figured the first frost would be pretty soon and I'd be switching over to my felt hat. I let my mind wander again, this time to what Vic had said, wondering if it was true. Her youngest brother had married my daughter a few months back, and I was hearing from Cady less and less. Delving into a little Freudian slip of my own, I wondered if that anxiety had intertwined with my worries about being even more involved with my undersheriff lately. I didn't consider myself a prude, but the difference in our ages and the fact that I was her boss continued to intrude on my thoughts.

She'd been even a little more volatile as of late, and I wasn't quite sure what that was about.

I allowed my eyes to drift across the freshly mowed east lawn of Meadowlark Elementary when I noticed that somebody was swinging on the playground, his body hurtling into the freshening air, each effort accompanied by the clanking of the chains that supported the swing. He was facing in the other direction, but I could see that he was skinny, startlingly blond—and missing his pants.

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